

15th December 2020

Dear Professor Wesley

Cc: Provost; PVC (India); PVC (International); DVC (Research)

We, the undersigned, are writing as scholars of India and as current academic fellows of the Australia India Institute (All). In light of our deep interest, and investment, in the success of Indian studies in Australia and in the All, we are writing, in confidence, to share our views on the University's plans for the future of the All, including our expectations regarding the Institute's future leadership.

We write, in particular, to emphasise the need to shape the future of the All around the values of academic freedom, independence, impartiality, inclusiveness, quality, diversity and respect for scholarly dissent. In what follows, we explain—with examples—why developments in India mean that the preservation of these values requires particular care and attention at this time. We hope that the concerns we raise here are taken into consideration as the future of All and its leadership are deliberated and decided in the coming weeks and months.

As you are doubtless aware, socio-political developments in India in recent years raise concerns relating to basic liberties, human rights and democratic values. In particular, we are concerned that the current majoritarian government has used sedition laws to curtail freedom of speech and has incarcerated academics and journalists as well as social workers with little evidence, due process or access to bail. Many appointments at leading Indian universities have been politicised in ways that have resulted in the transformation of universities away from scientific and evidence-based scholarly inquiry toward nativist cultural-nationalist agendas. Dissent, the lifeblood of any intellectual enterprise, including on University campuses, has been met with a harsh response. Together, these developments are reflected in India's poor ranking on [global indices of academic and media freedom](#).

In line with these developments, the Indian government has also demonstrated a keen interest in the activities of All, other India studies institutes and departments, as well as in scholars of India in Australia. As you might be aware, the Indian High Commission has routinely communicated its views of scholarly activities in Universities, including speakers and events, to those in leadership positions. At the University of Melbourne, this has led to some events relating to India being discouraged, or not supported, on the grounds that they were likely to be controversial. All fellows have been discouraged from including their All affiliation in opinion articles that are critical of the Indian government. A publicly-advertised event was downgraded to a private invitation-only seminar, following an intervention by the Indian High Commissioner.

At the same time, as scholars of India, we note that the tone or format of some events and activities on India have carried the flavour of propaganda, celebrating the current Indian government and its dominant culture, while excluding or downplaying its age-old secular, liberal or critical viewpoints. These events and practices threaten researchers' ability to hold open, intellectually-rigorous debates on pressing contemporary events in India and the region.

Against this concerning background, we believe that the University's vision for the future of the All must include an unshakeable commitment to academic freedom, independence, impartiality, inclusiveness, quality, diversity and respect for scholarly dissent. In order to honour this commitment, we offer the following thoughts regarding the All's vision, its future direction and leadership, and its enrichment:

1. The University's vision for the All must be broader than the bilateral relationship between governments of the day and fully embrace the value of promoting Australian scholarly engagement with a broad cross-section of Indian universities, schools, NGOs, the media, artists and others in conformity with the values of the University of Melbourne. An All that is primarily focussed on 'think tank'-type activities, designed mainly to promote official engagement, will be limited to engaging with institutions that are the preferred choices of the Indian government, and may not take into account the complexity of this billion-strong nation. We appreciate that the All is responsive to multiple constituencies, including different funders, and that the goodwill of the Indian government facilitates important activities (e.g. enabling easier access to visas for research). However, these considerations should not dilute the University's commitments to academic freedom, trustworthiness and research integrity.
2. The future leadership of the All (particularly its Director) must possess the independence, fortitude, integrity and resilience to respond firmly to the challenges of dealing with forces seeking to influence its activities and must be committed to protecting the freedom of scholars, particularly vulnerable scholars. Further, the leadership and the future Director must possess the full range of knowledge, skills and experience necessary to value and promote scholarly research on India. Also, they need to effectively leverage India-related expertise in Australian Universities, including the diverse India expertise that exists in non-G08 institutions around the country, as well as the various stakeholders across the length and breadth of Australia with historically-rooted knowledge about India/South Asia.
3. To fully leverage the engagement with India and study it in its specific context, we believe the All should be complemented by a significant South Asian studies program, at university level, where students can engage in deep study of the history, politics, laws, cultures, languages, businesses, sciences and societies of South Asia.

We believe that the above commitments are essential for the All to have a credible reputation amongst scholars, students, thinkers, and civil society in India; and for scholars of India in Australia, including at the University of Melbourne, to be truly invested in the All. Towards that end, we think the decisions concerning the future direction and leadership of the All would benefit from input from a range of stakeholders, including from University faculties with an interest in India and all fellows of the All.

We hope that you agree with the importance of maintaining the trustworthiness, integrity and reputation of the All in line with the University's commitments to academic freedom, trustworthiness and research integrity. We look forward to hearing your views and remain committed to working with you to shape the All to reflect these shared values.

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